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OFFICE OF PETITIONS

In re Patent No. 6,302,845
Issued: October 16, 2001
Application No.: 09/272,764
Filing Date: March 19, 1999
Attorney Docket No. 20208.0002U1

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This is responsive to the Response to Request for Information filed November 10, 2010, and a decision on the petition under 37 CFR 1.378(b), filed March 9, 2010, to reinstate the above-cited patent.

The petition is **dismissed**.

The patent issued October 16, 2001. The 3.5 year maintenance fee could have been paid from October 16, 2004, through April 16, 2005, or with a surcharge, as authorized by 37 CFR 1.20(h), during the period from April 17, 2005, to October 16, 2005. Petitioner did not do so. Accordingly, the patent expired at midnight on October 16, 2005.

A grantable petition under 37 CFR 1.378(b) must be accompanied by a showing to the satisfaction of the Commissioner that the entire delay in paying the required maintenance fee from the due date for the fee until the filing of a grantable petition pursuant to this paragraph was unavoidable. The showing of record is not sufficient to establish to the satisfaction of the Commissioner that the delay was unavoidable within the meaning of 37 CFR 1.378(b).

Opinion

Petitioner must establish that petitioner treated the patent the same as a reasonable and prudent person would treat his or her most important business.

The general standard applied by the Office requires petitioner to establish that petitioner treated the patent the same as a reasonable and prudent person would treat his or her most important business.¹

¹The Commissioner is responsible for determining the standard for unavoidable delay and for applying that standard. 35 U.S.C. 41(c)(1) states, "The Commissioner may accept the payment of any maintenance fee . . . at any time . . . if the delay is shown *to the satisfaction of the Commissioner* to have been unavoidable." (emphasis added).

"In the specialized field of patent law, . . . the Commissioner of Patent and Trademarks is primarily responsible for the application and enforcement of the various narrow and technical statutory and regulatory provisions. His interpretation of those provisions is entitled to considerable deference." Rydeen v. Quigg, 748 F. Supp. 900, 904, 16 U.S.P.Q2d (BNA) 1876 (D.D.C. 1990), *aff'd without opinion* Rule 36, 937 F.2d 623 (Fed Cir. 1991) (citing Morganroth v. Quigg, 885 F.2d 843, 848, 12 U.S.P.Q.2d agency's interpretation of a statute it administers is entitle to deference"); *see also Chevron U.S.A. Inc. v. Natural Resources Defense Council, Inc.*, 467 U.S. 837, 844, 81 L. Ed. 694, 104 S. Ct. 2778 (1984) ("if the statute s silent or

However, “[t]he question of whether an applicant’s delay in prosecuting an application was unavoidable [will] be decided on a case-by-case basis, taking all of the facts and circumstances into account.”² Nonawareness of the content of, or misunderstanding of PTO statutes, PTO rules, the MPEP, or the Official Gazette notices does not constitute unavoidable delay.³ The statute requires a “showing” by petitioner, therefore; petitioner has the burden of proof. The decision will be based solely on the written, administrative record in existence. It is not enough that the delay was unavoidable; petitioner must prove that the delay was unavoidable. A petition will not be granted if petitioner provides insufficient evidence to “show” that the delay was unavoidable.

Petitioner is responsible for possessing knowledge of the need to pay maintenance fees and the due dates for such fees. Petitioner is responsible for instituting a reliable docketing system to remind him or her when maintenance fees become due.

Petitioner is responsible for having knowledge of the need to pay maintenance fees and knowing when the fees are due.⁴ The Office has no duty to notify a patentee of the requirement to pay maintenance fees or to notify patentee when a maintenance fee is due.⁵ Even if the Office were required to provide notice to

ambiguous with respect to the specific issue, the question for the court is whether the agency’s answer is based on a permissible construction of the statute.”))

“The critical phrase ‘unless it be shown to the satisfaction of the Commissioner that such delay was unavoidable’ has remained unchanged since first enacted in 1861.” Smith v. Mossinghoff, 671 F.2d 533, 538, 213 U.S.P.Q. (BNA) 977 (D.C. Cir. 1982). The standard for “unavoidable” delay for reinstating a patent is the same as the unavoidable standard for reviving an application. See Ray v. Lehman, 55 F. 3d 606, 608-609, 34 U.S.P.Q.2d (BNA) 1786, 1781 (Fed Cir. 1995) (Citing In re patent No. 4,409,763, 7 U.S.P.Q.2d BNA) 1798, 1800 (Comm’r Pat. 1990); Smith v. Mossinghoff, 671 F. 2d 533, 538, 213 U.S.P. Q. (BNA) 977 (D.C. Cir. 1982). The court in In re Mattullath, accepted the standard which had been proposed by Commissioner Hall which “requires no more or greater care or diligence than is generally used and observed by prudent and careful men in relation to their most important business.” In re Mattullath, 38 App. D.C. 497, 514-515 (1912) (quoting Ex parte Pratt, 1887 Dec. Comm’r Pat 31, 32-33 (1887)).

²Smith v. Mossinghoff, 671 F.2d 533, 538, 213 U.S.P.Q. (BNA) 977 (1982).

³See Smith v. Mossinghoff, 671 F. 2d 533, 538, 213 U.S.P.Q. (BNA) 977 (Fed. Cir. 1982) (citing Potter v. Dann, 201 U.S.P.Q. (BNA) 574 (D.D.C. 1978) for the proposition that counsel’s nonawareness of PTO rules does not constitute “unavoidable” delay); Vincent v. Mossinghoff, 1985 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 23119, 13, 230 U.S.P.Q. (BNA) 621 (D.D.C. 1985) (plaintiffs, through their counsel’s action, or their own, must be held responsible for having noted the MPEP section and Official Gazette notices expressly stating that the certified mailing procedures outlined in 37 CFR 1.8(a) do not apply to continuation applications.) (Emphasis added).

⁴Nonawareness of PTO statutes, PTO rules, the MPEP, or Official Gazette notices, which state maintenance fee amounts and dates they are due does not constitute unavoidable delay. See Smith v. Mossinghoff, 671 F.2d 533, 538, 213 U.S.P.Q. *BNA) 977 (Fed. Cir. 1982) (citing Potter v. Dann, 201 U.S.P.Q. (BNA) 574 (D.D.C. 1978) for the proposition that counsel’s nonawareness of PTO rules does not constitute “unavoidable” delay); Vincent v. Mossinghoff, 1985 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 23119, 13, 230 U.S.P.Q. (BNA) 621 (D.D.C. 1985) (Plaintiffs, through their counsel’s actions, or their own must be held responsible for having noted the MPEP section and Official Gazette notices expressly stating that the certified mailing procedures outlined in 37 CFR 1.8(a) do not apply to continuation applications.) (Emphasis added).

Petitioner must act as a reasonable and prudent person in relation to his most important business. Upon obtaining the patent, a reasonable and prudent person, in relation to his most important business, would become familiar with the legal requirements of that business, in this case, the requirement to pay maintenance fees. In addition, a reasonable and prudent individual would read the patent itself and thereby become aware of the need to pay maintenance fees and the fact that such fee amounts are sometimes changed by law or regulation.

⁵Congress expressly conditioned §§ 133 and 151 [of the United States Code] on a specific type of notice, while no such notice requirements are written into § 41(c) . . . [T]he Commissioner’s no timely-notice interpretation.” Ray v. Comer, 1994 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 21478, 8-9 (1994), aff’d on other grounds Ray v. Lehman, 55 F.3d 606, 34 USPQ2d 1786 (Fed. Cir. 1995) (Citing

applicant of the existence of maintenance fee requirements, such notice is provided by the patent itself.⁶

A reasonable and prudent person, aware of the existence of maintenance fees, would not rely on maintenance fee reminders or on memory to remind him or her when payments would fall due several years in the future. Instead, such an individual would implement a reliable and trustworthy tracking system to keep track of the relevant dates.⁷ The individual would also take steps to ensure that the patent information was correctly entered into the tracking system.

Application of the unavoidable standard to the present facts

In the instant petition, petitioner argues that the above-cited patent should be reinstated because the delay in paying the 3.5-year maintenance fee was unavoidable and resulted from several apparent failures in the Thomas Jefferson University, Office of Technology Transfer & Business Development, hereinafter referred to as "OTT". Thomas Jefferson University is noted in USPTO records as the assignee for the subject patent.

The argument has been considered, but is not persuasive as the showing made in the petition is incomplete. Further to this point, Section 711.03(c)(2) provides, in pertinent part that:

In addition, decisions on revival are made on a "case-by-case basis, taking all the facts and circumstances into account." *Smith v. Mossinghoff*, 671 F.2d 533, 538, 213 USPQ 977, 982 (D.C. Cir. 1982). Finally, a petition cannot be granted where a petitioner has failed to meet his or her burden of establishing that the delay was "unavoidable." *Haines v. Quigg*, 673 F. Supp. 314, 316-17, 5 USPQ2d 1130, 1131-32 (N.D. Ind. 1987).

Rydeen v. Quigg, 748 F. Supp. 900, 905 (1990), Chevron U.S.A. Inc. v. Natural Resources Defense Council, Inc., 467 U.S. 837, 81 L. ed. 2d 694, 104 S. Ct. 2778 (1984)). "The Court concludes as it did in Rydeen, that as a constitutional matter, 'plaintiff was not entitled to any notice beyond publication of the statute.' *Id.* at 3 (citing Rydeen v. Quigg, 748 F. Supp. at 906, Texaco v. Short, 454 U.S. 516, 536, 70 L. Ed. 2d 738, 102 S. Ct. 781 (1982)).

The Patent Office, as a courtesy tries to send maintenance fee reminders and notices of patent expiration to the address of record. However, the failure to receive the reminder notice, and the lack of knowledge of the requirement to pay the maintenance fee, will not shift the burden of monitoring the time for paying a maintenance fee from the patentee to the Office. See MPEP 2575, 2540, 2590. Petitioner does not have a right to a personalized notice that this patent will expire if a certain maintenance fee is not paid, as the publication of the statute was sufficient notice. See Rydeen v. Quigg, 748 F. Supp. 900, 907 (1990). the ultimate responsibility for keeping track of maintenance fee states lies with the patentee, not the USPTO. Since the mailing of Notices by the Office is completely discretionary and not a requirement imposed by Congress, accepting an argument that failure to receive a Notice is unavoidable delay would result in all delays being unavoidable should the Office discontinue the policy. All petitions could allege non-receipt of the reminder, and therefore all petitions could be granted. This was clearly not the intent of Congress in the creation of the unavoidable standard.

⁶See Ray v. Lehman, 55 F.3d 606, 610; 34 USPQ2d 1786, 1789 (Fed. Cir. 1995). The Letters of Patent contain a Maintenance Fee Notice that warns that the patent may be subject to maintenance fees if the application was filed on or after December 12, 1980. While it is unclear as to who was and is in actual possession of the patent, petitioner's failure to read the Notice does not vitiate the Notice, nor does the delay resulting from such failure to read the Notice establish unavoidable delay.

⁷ 37 CFR 1.378(b)(3) precludes acceptance of a late maintenance fee for a patent unless a petitioner can demonstrate that steps were in place to monitor the maintenance fee. The federal Circuit has specifically upheld the validity of this regulation. Ray v. Lehman, 55 F.3d 606, 609; 34 USPQ2d (BNA) 1786 (Fed.Cir. 1995). In Ray v. Lehman, petitioner claimed that he had not known of the existence of the maintenance fees and therefore had no steps in place to pay such fees. The petitioner therefore argues that the PTO's regulation, 37 CFR 1.37(b)(3), *supra*, arguing that it 'creates a burden that goes well beyond what is reasonably prudent.' We disagree, The PTOs' regulation merely sets forth how one is to prove that he was reasonably prudent, i.e., by showing what steps he took to ensure that the maintenance fee would be timely paid, and the steps taken in seeking to reinstate the patent. We do not see these requirements additional to proving unavoidable delay, but as the very elements of unavoidable delay." *Id.*

Petitioner has not established that the entire delay in paying the maintenance fee was unavoidable. Petitioner recounts that the attorney who prosecuted the application, Clifford Weber was responsible for tracking and paying the maintenance fees for the subject patent; however, Mr. Weber's employment was terminated in July 1, 2003. Thereafter, petitioner states that the assignee's IP Counsel Group dissolved and, further the assignee's lead attorney's employment was terminated in May of 2004. By the instant "Response to Request for Information", petitioner offers the statement of Steven E. McKenzie, Vice President for Research who oversees the OTT. In summary, Mr. McKenzie states the following:

- the OTT has retained outside counsel to track and pay maintenance fees since July 1, 2003.
- OTT transferred all patent files to the outside counsel; the OTT retained one full-time employee as a liaison to outside firms.
- for issued patents and patent applications initiated and filed before July 1, 2003, once the OTT received a communication from the USPTO, the communication was entered to a database maintained by OTT. Once entered into the OTT database, the OTT sent the communication to outside counsel who then docketed the communication and tracked any due dates.
- the case of the subject patent, the Notice of Patent Expiration was received by the OTT on December 22, 2005, and entered into OTT's database by the receptionist. The receptionist resigned her position shortly thereafter and never forwarded the Notice of Patent Expiration to outside counsel.

Petitioner has not demonstrated that a reliable business routine was in place to track and pay the maintenance fee for the subject patent. Neither has petitioner demonstrated that petitioner relied on an otherwise knowledgeable and skilled employee in managing the OTT database and transferring the communications to outside counsel. It is noted that petitioner only addresses the issue of Notice of Patent Expiration not being forwarded to the outside counsel. This issue, alone, is not dispositive of whether the entire delay was unavoidable. It is noted that when a Letters of Patent is issued, it is accompanied by a maintenance fee schedule setting for the due dates for the payment of maintenance fees. The subject patent issued October 16, 2001; therefore, in accordance, with the assignee's system, once the Letters of Patent was received it should have been entered in the OTT database and maintenance fee schedule forwarded to outside counsel for docketing of the maintenance fee due dates. This did not occur and petitioner offers no explanation for why it did not. Further to this point, Section 711.03(c)(2) provides, in pertinent part that:

In addition, decisions on revival are made on a "case-by-case basis, taking all the facts and circumstances into account." *Smith v. Mossinghoff*, 671 F.2d 533, 538, 213 USPQ 977, 982 (D.C. Cir. 1982). Finally, a petition cannot be granted where a petitioner has failed to meet his or her burden of establishing that the delay was "unavoidable." *Haines v. Quigg*, 673 F. Supp. 314, 316-17, 5 USPQ2d 1130, 1131-32 (N.D. Ind. 1987).

Petitioner has not established that the entire delay in paying the maintenance fee was unavoidable. Petitioner recounts that the attorney who prosecuted the application, Clifford Weber was responsible for tracking and paying the maintenance fees for the subject patent; however, Mr. Weber's employment was terminated in July 1, 2003. Thereafter, petitioner states that the assignee's IP Counsel Group dissolved and, further the assignee's lead attorney's employment was terminated in May of 2004. Petitioner states that there does not appear to have been any provisions made by Mr. Weber, anyone in the IP Counsel Group, or the Office of Technology Transfer and Business Development for the tracking of the maintenance fees or the payment of the maintenance fees. These facts do not demonstrate that there was

a place business routine in place around the time the patent issued, i.e., October 2001, to ensure timely payment of the maintenance fee. Without any business routine in place to track and pay the maintenance fee during the entire relevant period, it is not possible to establish that the entire delay in paying the maintenance fee was unavoidable. The failure to establish a business routine for tracking and paying the maintenance fee during the entire relevant period is arguably imprudent and belies the assertion that the delay was unavoidable.

In trying to establish that the entire delay was unavoidable, petitioner asserts that the Notice of Patent Expiration was received on December 22, 2005, and entered into the OTT database, but that the receptionist never sent the notice to outside counsel. Section 2590 of the MPEP indicates that:

... an error in a docketing system could possibly result in a finding that a delay in payment was unavoidable if it were shown that reasonable care was exercised in designing and operating the system and that the patentee took reasonable steps to ensure that the patent was entered into the system to ensure timely payment of the maintenance fee.

Further, Section 711.03(c)(2) provides, in pertinent part that:

In addition, decisions on revival are made on a "case-by-case basis, taking all the facts and circumstances into account." *Smith v. Mossinghoff*, 671 F.2d 533, 538, 213 USPQ 977, 982 (D.C. Cir. 1982). Finally, a petition cannot be granted where a petitioner has failed to meet his or her burden of establishing that the delay was "unavoidable." *Haines v. Quigg*, 673 F. Supp. 314, 316-17, 5 USPQ2d 1130, 1131-32 (N.D. Ind. 1987).

A delay resulting from an error (e.g., a docketing error) on the part of an employee in the performance of a clerical function may provide the basis for a showing of "unavoidable" delay, provided it is shown that:

- (A) the error was the cause of the delay at issue;
- (B) there was in place a business routine for performing the clerical function that could reasonably be relied upon to avoid errors in its performance; and
- (C) the employee was sufficiently trained and experienced with regard to the function and routine for its performance that reliance upon such employee represented the exercise of due care.

Petitioner has not made a showing that the delay resulting from the inaction of the unnamed receptionist was unavoidable as petitioner is not shown that: 1) the error was the cause of the delay at issue; 2) there was in place a business routine for performing the clerical function that could reasonably be relied upon to avoid error, and 3) the employee was sufficiently trained and experienced with regard to the function and routine for its performance that reliance upon such employee represented the exercise of due care.

Further, a statement is required from all persons with direct knowledge of the cause of unavoidable delay. Section 2590 of the *Manual of Patent Examining Procedure* (MPEP) provides that, among other requirements, a petition to accept late payment of a maintenance fee, where the delay was unavoidable, must include:

- (C) a showing that the delay was unavoidable since reasonable care was taken to ensure that the maintenance fee would be timely and that the petition was filed promptly after the patentee was notified of, or otherwise became aware of, the expiration of the patent.

The required showing must enumerate the steps taken to ensure timely payment of the maintenance fee, the date and the manner in which patentee became aware of the expiration of the patent, and the steps taken to file the petition promptly. Furthermore, an adequate showing requires a statement by all persons with direct knowledge of the cause of delay, setting forth the facts as they know them. Copies of all documentary evidence referred to in a statement should be furnished as exhibits to the statement.

A statement from the employee charged with handling records and notices relative to the subject patent is, therefore, required. Petitioner is cautioned that it will be difficult to grant a petition for unavoidable delay without a statement from the employee that would have first-hand knowledge the circumstances that resulted in the delay.

Further, statement is required from all persons with direct knowledge of the cause of unavoidable delay. Section 2590 of the *Manual of Patent Examining Procedure* (MPEP) provides that, among other requirements, a petition to accept late payment of a maintenance fee, where the delay was unavoidable, must include:

(C) a showing that the delay was unavoidable since reasonable care was taken to ensure that the maintenance fee would be timely and that the petition was filed promptly after the patentee was notified of, or otherwise became aware of, the expiration of the patent.

The required showing must enumerate the steps taken to ensure timely payment of the maintenance fee, the date and the manner in which patentee became aware of the expiration of the patent, and the steps taken to file the petition promptly. Furthermore, an adequate showing requires a statement by all persons with direct knowledge of the cause of delay, setting forth the facts as they know them. Copies of all documentary evidence referred to in a statement should be furnished as exhibits to the statement.

A statement from the employee charged with handling the payment of the maintenance fee is, therefore, required. Petitioner is cautioned that it will be difficult to grant a petition for unavoidable delay without a statement from the employee that would have first-hand knowledge the circumstances that resulted in the delay.

As was indicated in the Request for Information mailed September 10, 2010, petitioner is required to affirmatively identify the cause of the delay in paying the maintenance fee and provide a statement from every person with first-hand knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the delay in paying the maintenance fee. Petitioner must provide statements from any person who may have been charged with paying the maintenance fee and statements from any person with first-hand knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the failure to pay the maintenance fees. At present, petitioner has only surmised that the records for the subject patent were lost and forgotten about after the termination of the employment of Mr. Weber and that of the assignee's lead counsel and concludes that the resulting delay in paying the maintenance fee was unavoidable. Petitioner has not affirmatively identified the cause of the delay in paying the maintenance fee, or the circumstances that contributed to the delay, and has not provided a statement from any person with first-hand knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the delay in paying the maintenance fee.

Lastly, a successful petition under 37 CFR 1.378(b) requires that petitioner demonstrate that the entire delay in paying the maintenance fee—from the due date for the maintenance fee until the filing of a grantable petition—was unavoidable. Petitioner states that the Office of Technology Transfer and Business Development was made aware of the expiration of the patent when the Notice of Patent Expiration was sent to the Office of Technology Transfer and Business Development by the University Counsel. Petitioner states that because no case file existed for the patent, the receipt of the notice was docketed in Office of Technology Transfer and Business Development database but no further action was taken until 2009. Arguably, this inaction after the assignee's staff was made aware that the patent was expired further undermines petitioner's claim that the entire delay was unavoidable. This delay further undermines petitioner's claim that the entire delay was unavoidable as petitioner had actual knowledge that the patent was expired, yet took no immediate action to address the matter.

Petitioner's Current Options

I. Petitioner may file a request for reconsideration.

If reconsideration of this decision is desired, a petition for reconsideration must be filed within TWO (2) MONTHS from the mail date of this decision.⁸ The petition for reconsideration should be titled "Petition for Reconsideration under 37 CFR 1.378(b)." Any petition for reconsideration for this decision must be accompanied by a non-refundable petition fee of \$400.00 as set forth in 37 CFR 1.17(h).

After a decision on the petition for reconsideration, no further reconsideration or review of the matter will be undertaken by the Commissioner. It is, therefore, extremely important that petitioner supply any and all relevant information and documentation with the request for reconsideration. The Commissioner's decision will be based solely on the administrative record in existence. Petitioner should remember that is not enough that the delay was unavoidable; petitioner must prove that the delay was unavoidable. A petition will not be granted if petitioner provides insufficient evidence "to show" that the delay was unavoidable. If a request for reconsideration is filed, it must establish that the entire delay in the submission of the maintenance fee was unavoidable.

II. Petitioner may request a refund of the maintenance fee and surcharge which accompanied the petition.

Petitioner may request a refund of the maintenance fee and surcharge by writing to the Office of Finance, Refund Section. A copy of this decision should accompany petitioner's request.

Further correspondence with respect to this matter should be addressed as follows:

By mail: Commissioner for Patent
Mail Stop Petitions
Box 1450
Alexandria, VA 22313-1460

By facsimile: (571) 273-8300
Attn: Office of Petitions

A reasonable and prudent person would not rely on maintenance fee reminders from the Office for two reasons. First, the Office has indicated that such reminders are a mere courtesy and has reserved the right to discontinue such reminders at any time. Second, such reminders may be lost in the mail. A reasonable and prudent person, in regard to his most important business would not rely solely on reminders that the Office may or may not send which may or may not be lost in the mail.

⁸No extension of this two-month time limit can be granted under 37 CFR 1.136(a) or (b). This is not a final agency action within the meaning of 5 U.S.C. § 704.